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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001381

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA: WHAT I ADVISED SLEIMAN TO RAISE
IN U.S. TRIP

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) PM Siniora told the Ambassador that President Michel Sleiman, in his upcoming visit to Washington, would raise UNSCR 1701; Sheba'a; protecting Lebanon against regional shocks, the need for continued U.S. political, economic and military assistance to Lebanon; and assurances that Lebanon will not be a "prize" for "good behavior" by Syria. He said he encouraged Sleiman to overcome his initial reluctance to go to Washington. He urged the USG to convince March 14 leaders to avoid unnecessary battles. Siniora will travel to Saudi Arabia September 21 for a brief pilgrimage and will also see King Abdullah. Siniora showed keen interest in follow up actions related to his August trip to Iraq, both for an agreement on oil and to work on bringing Iraq back into the Arab fold. End Summary.

SLEIMAN'S TRIP TO WASHINGTON

¶2. (C) Ambassador and DCM met with PM Fouad Siniora and his aide Rola Noureddine at the Grand Serail on Saturday, September 20, the day before President Michel Sleiman departed for his U.S. trip. Ambassador asked Siniora what would be Sleiman's messages with President Bush. Siniora, who is proud of his good relationship with Sleiman, said that he had advised the President to raise UNSCR 1701, Sheba'a Farms and protecting Lebanon against shocks in the region. Elaborating, Siniora said there is a role for the U.S. on Sheba'a (by which meant urging Israel to withdraw), the Palestinian issue and providing Lebanon military, economic and political assistance. He also urged Sleiman to ask the U.S. President what might be "coming in the region", in particular with Israel and Iran, and seek assurances that Lebanon will not be a "prize for good behavior" for Syria or others.

¶3. (C) Siniora admitted that Sleiman had had initial doubts about going to Washington. Hinting that he had had a role in persuading him to go, Siniora said Sleiman needed to be -- at this point, he made a pushing motion with his two hands while he searched for the right word -- "encouraged." But, as he has before, Siniora praised Sleiman for the role he has played since becoming President in May. Siniora thought the U.S. trip was important to send a message about Lebanon's

sovereignty; that there is no longer the need for Lebanon's president to ask "permission" for such a trip (presumably in contrast to the time when Syria would have had a veto on such a trip).

¶4. (C) When Ambassador asked if there had been any new developments on Sheba'a, Siniora said UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon had sent him a very general response to his recent letter. He commented that UN Deputy SYG Asha-Rose Migiro, who visited Beirut the previous week, was clearly "out of the loop" on sensitive Lebanese political matters and that media reports that there had been substantive discussions with her had been much exaggerated.

SINIORA, SAFADI TRAVELING TO SAUDI ARABIA

¶5. (C) Earlier in the day, Siniora joined the Saudi Ambassador and Education Minister Bahia Hariri to announce that the Saudi government had donated \$44 million for payment of school fees, books and other education-related expenses. Siniora told us this would be distributed throughout Lebanon. The PM mentioned that he would be leaving the next day for Saudi Arabia to perform a "mini-pilgrimage" but also to meet King Abdullah. (Note: At a dinner that evening, Economy Minister Safadi told the Ambassador that he, too, would be traveling to Saudi Arabia to seek from the King some help for his native city of Tripoli. The trips by Siniora and Safadi, nominal March 14 allies in the cabinet, are apparently not coordinated. End Note.)

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U.S. SHOULD PUSH MARCH 14 TO AVOID UNNECESSARY BATTLES

¶6. (C) Siniora attended the first session of the National Dialogue on September 16, and reported that Sleiman did well to keep the agenda and participation list from being expanded as the opposition sought. Siniora said he sees this is a period of "repositioning" by political parties (apparently referring to the Jumblatt-Hizballah-Arslan and possible Hariri-Hizballah meetings) and thought that process would continue during the Dialogue, which apparently will move very slowly, with the second session scheduled for November 5. He urged the Ambassador to persuade March 14 leaders to coordinate better with each other and avoid "side battles." He mentioned specifically unnecessary March 14 battles with Syria.

RECONCILIATION

7. (C) Siniora said that the importance of the agreement on which he worked that ended the recent violence in Tripoli was that civil society in that city now had a stronger role to resolve tensions. He implicitly blamed Syria for the trouble, saying the Syrians were looking to set up a situation in which Lebanese authorities would be seen as ineffective at preventing violence, leading to an invitation to Syria to return to Lebanon to restore order.

USG ASSISTANCE

¶8. (C) PM Siniora highlighted the need for support to Lebanon's army. The Ambassador noted the continued support, including enhanced training to both the LAF and the ISF. Siniora focused on the need to provide the army with needed equipment in a timely manner, recounting delays encountered during the fierce fighting at Nahr al Barid camp in 2007. The Ambassador also said the USG is interested in carrying out development activities that will promote economic development and support the institutions of the state. Siniora revealed that he had a number of ideas for projects in various parts of Lebanon and wanted to follow up with us.

He is consulting with others on these projects, he said, and has ideas for the North, Metn and Chouf areas, but needs to finish consultations regarding the Bekaa and South. Ambassador agreed to discuss these with him when he had completed his consultations.

FOLLOW UP ON HIS TRIP TO IRAQ

¶9. (C) Siniora was eager to discuss Iraq. He said that his visit there in August was intended to promote economic cooperation, especially Iraq supplying oil to Lebanon, but also to promote Iraq's return to the Arab fold. He said Finance Minister Chatah and Energy Minister Tabourian would travel to Iraq to follow up on energy issues. He noted that in the past, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq had been effective at curbing Syrian aggressiveness, but this has changed.

¶10. (C) As he walked her to the door, Siniora grumbled to the Ambassador about Michel Aoun and his appointees in the cabinet of the national unity government, singling out Telecommunication Minister Gebran Bassil and Energy and Water Minister Alan Tabourian as particularly unhelpful. Tabourian cuts a fine figure with a Harvard degree, but some of his actions are irrational, Siniora complained.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) We expect that President Sleiman likely will raise with President Bush the issues that Siniora described, since they track with views Sleiman has expressed to us and senior USG visitors in the past months. Siniora was very relaxed and at ease except when discussing the Aoun members of cabinet. We have heard complaints from many in the new, national unity cabinet about meetings that last as many as

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seven hours, with much time spent on matters that are not significant. End Comment.

SISON